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SESSION – DIASPORIC  
INFLUENCE ON HOST  
COUNTRY DOMESTIC  
POLITICAL ACTIVITY:  
CROATIANS IN  
CANADA OR  
CROATIAN-  
CANADIANS?



The question I would like to begin with concerns the degree to which host country policies are affected by diaspora influence? The short answer would be: In those cases where the ethnic/diaspora group in question has some influence the answer may be yes, but there are few cases of this and is limited primarily to those sending countries where, in this case Canada, has either direct or indirect strategic or other interests. The answer to this question in the Croatian case, however, reflects a different reality. Since the January 2000 elections, the influence of the Croatian diaspora on homeland political and economic affairs has diminished considerably, particularly given the defeat of the HDZ which received over 60 percent of the diaspora vote. Measures have included: the closure of the Ministry of Return and Immigration; delays in the tabling of a Bill of Returnees (modelled on the Israeli Law of Return); the planned closing of some consulate offices in the United States, Canada, and Australia; and the parliamentary review of the special diaspora ticket<sup>1</sup> introduced by HDZ into the Croatian constitution in 1995. Initiatives on the part of the new governing coalition to eliminate diaspora representation in the Sabor (through the special diaspora ticket - have sparked outrage on the part of Croatian diaspora organizations such as the Croatian World Congress (Hrvatski Svjetski Kongres). The removal of Ante Beljo, a prominent returnee from Canada, from his position as executive director of the Croatian Homeland Foundation, the state-supported diaspora organization in Zagreb, also sent a strong message to the diaspora concerning their future role in homeland affairs. President Mesić, in an interview given in April 2001, made his position clear on the influence of diaspora in homeland affairs: "There are a number of Croats who come from Croatia, whose grandfathers and great-grandfathers were Croats, but who are now citizens of other countries. They may be Croatian patriots, but they are first and foremost residents

of other countries, like the USA or Chile”. The factors mentioned thus far, however, only reflect conditions as they appear at a macro-level. While this perspective is necessary, I would argue that it only provides a backdrop to the more important processes involving the lives, perceptions and practices of Croatians “on the ground”.

The perspective I will take in this presentation is one that emphasizes a more localized view – one that looks at the political activity of ethnic Croats in Toronto and their response to and involvement in Canadian politics, both locally and nationally. Given their relatively small numbers vis à vis other ethnic groups in Canada (estimates range from 150,000–220,000), Croatians do not wield the kind of political influence of the more established immigrant or diaspora groups. However, their activities in the last 12 years demonstrate how the combination of circumstances (homeland independence), perseverance and a strong sense of peoplehood have made Croatians a group that Canadian politicians have taken note of.

I have been examining the activities of the Croatian-Canadian diaspora since 1992 and have noticed shifts that have changed the ways in which Croatians in Canada see themselves in relation to their compatriots in the homeland, co-ethnics in their communities and their fellow citizens in Canada. While Croatians have always maintained ties to the homeland over the years, I have found that they have also developed an enhanced awareness of the Canadian political environment and of their relationship to it as citizens, as stakeholders. While independence and the promise of a future free of communism has given Croatians an outlet for articulating nationalist sentiments and ethnic pride, it has also become a means of renegotiating the terms upon which a sense of belonging in Canada is based. In fact, during the homeland war (1992–95), many argued that Canadian citizenship gave them the right to lobby the Canadian government on foreign policy issues regarding Croatia. In addition, by publicly promoting Croatian state efforts to establish a pluralist society modelled on Western liberal-democratic traditions, many have felt that they not only affirm their loyalty to the new Croatian state but demonstrated their commitment to and stake in the traditions and values of Canadian political culture. International recognition of Croatia as a sovereign state also provides Croatians with a new sense of pride and pedigree as members of the new Croatian nation-state and not as just another ethno-national group officially lumped together with other nationalities from the former Yugoslavia. Nonetheless, Croatians have to con-

tinue to negotiate their identities as Canadians and Croatsians (or both) on terms dictated by the Canadian state that has discouraged explicitly nationalist affiliations with homelands. Indeed, according to critics of Canadian multicultural policy such as Keith Spicer (1991) and Reginald Bibby (1990), homeland ties have the effect of ghettoising diversity by unravelling the fragile bonds holding Canadians together (Winland 1998). This position is exemplified by the influential social philosopher Charles Taylor, in his analysis of Canadian multiculturalism. In his widely read discussion of the politics of recognition diaspora societies are seen as problematic:

“Their porousness means that they are more open to multinational migration: more of their members live the life of diaspora, whose centre is elsewhere... the awkwardness arises from the fact that there are substantial numbers of people who are citizens and also belong to the culture that calls into question *our* philosophical boundaries”. [1994:63, emphasis mine]

An alternative and, I argue more constructive view draws attention to the challenge of transnationalism for studies of multiculturalism (Vertovec 2001, Sassen 1998). The Canadian government has come to realize that the issue of transnationalism is not just a political but a social issue and therefore it can no longer stick to the commonly held view of the immigrant who simply uproots from her country of origin to settle in a new land. In an increasingly globalized world, characterized in part by exponential increase in access to telecommunications, cheap and fast travel and enhanced international commerce, immigrants have points of reference that take them beyond the borders of the host nation. People are connected to greater or lesser degrees, symbolically, politically, economically or simply through familial ties to their place of origin, putative or real. They can participate (where circumstances allow) in a more direct way in the internal affairs of the homeland.

### Croatsians in Canada: a Brief Overview

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Like many diaspora groups, Croatsians have maintained links to their homeland through kinship ties, but they have also always been deeply concerned about political developments back home. Because the homeland focus has always been a magnet of group identification, Croatsians responded intensely to all political events beginning with those in monarchist Yugoslavia, especially after the assassination in 1928 of the leader of the Croatian Peasant Party,

Stjepan Radić, who became a folk hero for many Croatians. Political organization became a very important form of community activity for Croatians in Canada. At this time, many Croatian labourers joined the trade union movement in Canada, some becoming affiliated with the Communist Party of Canada. Involvement with these kinds of organizations was, however, frowned upon by Canadian government officials. Of course, over the decades, the ruling powers in Croatia had varying relationships with their expatriates from hostile to welcoming, followed by ambivalence and some even say rejection. For example, just as the Canadian government was interested in suppressing union radicalism and Communist Party affiliation, the Yugoslav monarchy under the reign of King Alexander that took an active role in the affairs of emigrants, was determined to stifle the development of dissident political movements overseas when they proved attractive to Yugoslav immigrants, particularly to Croatians. The Yugoslav government organized political clubs in diaspora communities in Canada working with Yugoslav loyalists and with the express purpose of gathering information about leftist and Croatian nationalist groups. It would then volunteer this information to the Canadian authorities, a move that frequently led to the deportation of Croatian community leaders, who were branded as radicals, and to the banning of Croatian-language newspapers. These and other actions led to abiding feelings of mistrust among Croatians, primarily because of the complicity of the Canadian government with Yugoslav authorities in discrediting and harassing Croatians in Canada. These actions ultimately forced Croatians to lose faith in government as a rule and to close ranks, relying on each other through Croatian networks and support groups.

Canadian federal government initiatives in the early 1970s to design and implement multicultural programmes were seized upon by Croatians. The establishment of “heritage language” programs and of Croatian music and folklore groups resulted from these initiatives. Many Croatian social clubs were gradually depoliticized in the 1970s and 1980s in order to detach themselves from negative political factionalism and to achieve cultural objectives (Rasporich, 1982). With the introduction of Canadian federal multicultural policies and initiatives in 1971, Croatian heritage language programs, music and folklore groups flourished. However, national origins form the basis for Canadian ethnic classifications and over the years, Croatians have responded in ways that reflect their acceptance, ambivalence for, or rejection of the terms under which

(ethnic, national, and so forth) recognition has been extended. Croatians have had to play the politics of recognition (Taylor 1994) on the basis of terms set by the Canadian state, foregrounding ethno-cultural traditions as part of the Croatian contribution to the (cultural) fabric of Canadian society conceived of ideologically as a multicultural mosaic (Fleras and Elliott 1992).

For example, until 1991, the Canadian census did not recognize Croatian identity as a separate category given that it did not refer to official citizenship, whereas Yugoslav was officially recognized. Many Croatians I interviewed concurred with the assessment that the community seemed to suffer from an “inferiority complex” arguing that this was the result of negative stereotypes and fear generated by years of monitoring of the Croatian expatriate community by the Yugoslav government. Yugoslav involvement in the affairs of Croatian immigrants in Canada since the early years of this century has left its mark on Croatians. To a certain degree, then, these suspicions and sentiments, generated both in Canada and in the mother country, reinforced insularity and insecurity in the Croatian community. In the 1960s and 1970s, Croatians in Canada were deeply distressed by accusations of Croatian terrorism by Canadian government leaders. The Croatian community responded by challenging what they regarded as unsubstantiated allegations of terrorist activity.<sup>2</sup>

### Croatians and Homeland Independence

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Croatians in Canada, who have thus historically kept a low profile, began in 1990 to assert their ethnic pride during the war primarily by identifying with the political cause of their kin in the former Yugoslavia. Regardless of their specific relationships to the mother country, they began to speak of their transformation as a people from what they represented as an historically repressed minority group in the former Yugoslavia to a proud, new nation that has successfully shrugged off the yoke of communist rule and asserted a new sense of purpose and pride. Narratives of renewal replace those of displacement and oppression. Such revitalization of discourses of Croatianness and the intensification of transnational links as a consequence of Croatian independence, have resulted in a movement to reclaim and redefine Croatian origins and affiliations. This diaspora was galvanized by the issue of Croatian independence in unprecedented fashion. For example, the community tirelessly mobilized support for Croatian relief through fund-raising and volunteering of services, such as

sending student brigades to rebuild war-torn areas and to serve in the military. The history of Croatian community in Canada is one which, regardless of its successes or failures, has been marked by numerous efforts to engage with the Canadian government, be it through political actions such as rallies and protests or most recently, lobbying the federal government for support of an independent Croatia.

The emergence of Croatian independence in 1990 has been the strongest catalyst for the revitalized self-image of Croatians of all ages, regardless of the strength of their ties to the mother country. This period, more than any other in the history of the Croatian diaspora, has changed the way in which Croatians see themselves. Virtually all Croatians encountered during the period of this research have been affected in some way by events in the former Yugoslavia. Among other things, transnational links have intensified and connections to the mother country have taken on new significance. The establishment of Bedem Ljubavi (Mothers for Peace), the Canadian Croatian Information Congress, and numerous other fundraising, political, and relief organizations facilitated communication and interaction among Croatians offering new opportunities for those who have seldom or never actively taken part in Croatian community life. More importantly it seemed to jolt the community into realizing the importance of forging ties with the federal government and making their voices heard. The new context of an independent (and democratic) Croatia has allowed for the emergence of positive public displays of ethnicity in Canada, thanks in part to the media attention generated by the war. It has given the community a visibility it never had before. While many of these efforts have been directed at the Canadian media, government and public at large, they have also provided some Croatians with an outlet for articulating nationalistic sentiments and ethnic pride. Independence and the war resulted in a flood of information and new avenues for transnational communication between homeland and diaspora Croatians, including among other things the establishment of news services, newspapers, the proliferation of amateur videos, numerous publications on the war (among them nationalist treatises and medical journals chronicling the human toll of war), and of web-sites on the Internet, some of which have come and gone.

At one level, Croatians were very active in supporting the move towards independence and indeed Croatian emigrants played a central role in the success of the present regime. According to Misha Glenny (1992), four million dollars was raised by the emigrant Croatian community



(primarily in Canada, the United States, and Australia) towards the HDZ political campaign in 1990. The importance of diaspora support was further evidenced in the steady stream of newly appointed Croatian government officials who are featured as keynote speakers at Croatian fund-raisers in Canada, particularly in Toronto. It soon became apparent just how central the Croatian diaspora was to the success of Tudjman's drive for independence and in this way he differed from his political opponents.

A residual effect of this period was the heightened awareness of the potential of Croats to affect change through their political representatives at the constituency level and beyond. Several examples of Croatian participation in the Canadian political realm reveal the challenges in balancing loyalties and affiliations. For example, Janko Perić, currently a Liberal member of Canadian parliament, has made a point of foregrounding the cultural dimension of his Croatian ancestry (born, raised, and educated in Croatia; immigrated to Canada in 1968) as the first Croatian federal MP in Canada. He has also been actively involved in promoting Croatian-Canadian business and cultural contacts in Croatia. The response of the Canadian government to his efforts has been mixed.

The experience of John Šola, a Member of Provincial Parliament for the Liberal Party in Ontario differs from Perić's in several respects. Šola's case provides an interesting example of both how homeland events impacted on local Croatian politics and on the management of Croatian public image in Toronto. In 1987, John Šola was elected to office as a member of the provincial parliament in Ontario. He was well known for his vocal support for a free and independent Croatia, so much so that a reporter for a local Mississauga weekly newspaper commenting on the election results stated: "Voters in Mississauga East have elected a man who seems to think he's gone to Queen's Park to free his Croatian homeland" (Mississauga News, 13 September 1987). He enjoyed the financial and political support of Croatian community in both his Mississauga East constituency (which has a large Croatian population) and the Croatian community at large. During the war, Šola became more involved and hence visible in Croatian efforts for the homeland. He was present at many Croatian functions and fund-raisers in his capacity not only as legislative representative for his constituency but very clearly as a Croatian nationalist. For example, at a rally that I had attended in late 1992, Šola was seated at the head table with several prominent political representatives from the newly elected HDZ government. He first ran

into trouble in 1994 for his inflammatory comments about the war in Croatia when he stated: “I don’t think I’d be able to live next door to a Serb”. These comments provoked outrage from the Serb community in Toronto, some of whom lived in his riding. He was subsequently ousted from the Ontario Liberal Caucus by the then Liberal party leader, Lyn Macleod due to what was perceived to be inappropriate remarks and, in the view of some critics, crude nationalist invective. Šola was, however, undeterred. While sitting as an independent member of provincial parliament, Šola continued to make controversial remarks including those made at a speech to Croatian students at York University where I work in which he stated that Serbian-Canadians had shown that “they support ethnic cleansing, that they support mass rape, that they support mass murder”. He was subsequently forced to leave the Liberal party caucus in 1994 as a result of these inflammatory remarks.

Diaspora Croatians I spoke to about these incidents had mixed reactions to Šola’s displays of ethnic partisanship. While on the one hand, they felt that Šola did not exercise good judgement in making his feelings on the issue public, particularly given his political position, almost all were pleased that he had been “courageous” enough to put his opinion on public record. When he stood for re-election in 1995, the headline in the Toronto Star newspaper read: “Ethnic Loyalties Taint Election”. The supporter of another candidate was quoted as saying that: “You can’t get anywhere near the association executive unless you’re Croatian”. Šola lost his bid for reelection in 1995. After his defeat, Šola left provincial politics and has since been appointed as Consulate General of the Republic of Croatia in Chicago. He now goes by his Croatian name, Domagoj Sladojević-Šola.

While the circumstances of Šola’s rise and fall are unique, the circumstances that gave rise to the series of events that followed are not. In an ethnically diverse city like Toronto, there are many politicians from different ethnic and other backgrounds – Portuguese, Italian, Greek, Muslim, etc.<sup>3</sup> During times of change in the homeland – violent or not – members of ethnic communities will look to whatever resource they can. Desperate times call for desperate measures but these can sometimes backfire. In Šola’s case, the government took notice of the problems inherent in taking political stances on the part of certain ethnic constituencies.

Independence also introduced a new set of concerns that reflected Croatian frustration and anxieties about

their public image in Canada. Comments made repeatedly by President Tuđman before his death in 1999 in essence relativized the genocidal aspects of the Ustaše past as part of the normal progress of war and the post-1990 process of ethno-national homogenization. These and other inflammatory comments by Tuđman exacerbated Croatian frustrations over their image in Canada. Some diaspora Croats feared the iconography of the *kuna* as Croatia's official currency in 1994, since it has the same name as the money used by Croatia's collaborationist Axis-led government in 1941, confirmed the image of the new Croatia as a dangerously nationalist or proto-fascist state (and of Croats as an inherently fascist people). Regardless of their political points of view, Toronto Croats made it very clear that despite their overwhelming support for Tuđman, they did not want their newfound national identity to be associated with the taint of fascism, especially given the efforts of Serbs (both in the former Yugoslavia and in the diaspora) to link present-day Croats to their Ustaše past. As a self-employed painter remarked: "Too many people still believe we are Nazis" (August 1993). Many Croats expressed frustration with what they saw as exaggeration and an inordinate amount of emphasis on several isolated incidents of violence. Some still remember when Croats in Canada were accused of terrorism by Canadian government leaders in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, in a 1975 speech, the Canadian Minister of External Affairs promised to control "the activities of right-wing groups opposed to the Belgrade government" ("Minister Takes Aim at Terrorists" 1975:A3). Reports in Toronto newspapers during the homeland war with such titles as "Neo-Nazis Deface Church" (MacDonald 1994:7), referring to Ustaše symbols and slogans spray-painted on a Serbian Orthodox church in downtown Toronto, also contributed to frustration and anger over the persistence of these images.

## Conclusion

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Most Croats have been unified on one point: communism was bad for Croatia and independence is good. With some exceptions, they have always identified their common enemy as the Communist Yugoslav state. This consensus was articulated in diaspora narratives depicting a history of hardship and oppression punctuated with tales of catastrophes (a frequently used example is the Bleiburg Massacre of Croatian soldiers and civilians in April 1945), constructed so as to explain the separation between Cro-

atians and their homeland. The past constructed in these ways provided the foundation upon which Croatians have imagined and represented themselves for decades. Independence, however, has introduced new challenges for Croatians, the most important of which is how to redefine themselves to each other and to the state in which they live. It has also forced Croatians in Canada to re-evaluate and renegotiate long-held sentiments and narratives, not only of the mother country but of their identity as Croatians and as Canadians.

It has also had a number of repercussions for the ways in which Croatians regard politics in Canada. For some, Canada failed them, particularly in providing support for Croatia when it was at war. But it has also driven home the issue of being and belonging in Canada as well as the significance of homeland ties to their sense of who they are as Canadians and as Croatians. While I don't believe that any particular policies have been affected by the Croatian example, it is clear that the Canadian government is responding to the intensification of diaspora-homeland ties. This is presently being spurred on by security concerns, pressure from the U.S. to tighten up immigration/refugee controls and to monitor diaspora political activities such as those of Tamils, Sikhs, Muslim associations and others, particularly where the homeland is experiencing violent conflict and instability. My hope, however, is that the lessons to be learned will not only be applied in crisis situations such as those precipitated by the events of September 11, 2001, but will begin to permeate the sensibilities of politicians and policy makers still committed to anachronistic and bounded notions of ethnic community, multiculturalism and citizenship.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Article 45 of the *Law on Citizenship and Culture*, reserved twelve seats in the Croatian parliament for diaspora representatives.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Croatians were upset by a speech (in 1975) by the Canadian minister of external affairs promising to control "the activities of right-wing groups opposed to the Belgrade government" (*Toronto Star*, 19 Sept. 1975).

<sup>3</sup> Joe Mihevic, for example, is of Croatian ancestry and one of the best city councillors the city has seen in a long time.